

The Grim ABC's of AIDS

A government report says children must be told about the disease

Surgeon General C. Everett Koop has never been known to pull his punches, even on such tough issues as smoking and abortion. Last week he headed into the ring once again with the public release of an unusually frank 36-page report on AIDS. Filled with the latest scientific evidence and diagrams showing how the virus is transmitted through anal sex and drug use, the most controversial thing about the report was a not-so-modest proposal for fighting the disease by teaching young children about it in the schools and at home.

The best way to prevent the spread of the deadly virus that has already killed 15,000 Americans and has infected another 1.5 million, Koop says, is to begin teaching about AIDS "at the lowest grade possible" as part of a continuing sex-education curriculum. Koop urges that the lessons be reinforced at home, with open conversations between parents and children on sexuality and drug use. "We warn our children early about the dangerous consequences of playing with matches or crossing the street before checking for traffic," Koop said of his report, which was prepared at the request of the White House. "We have no less a responsibility to guide them in avoiding behaviors that may expose them to AIDS."

Koop's report is especially surprising because his stern recommendations contradict the long-established administration view that explicit sex education belongs in the home. However, says one senior White House aide, there is support for more drastic action. "We're so concerned about this that we're not mincing words anymore," he says. Even Education Secretary William Bennett—an opponent of a national sex-education policy—endorsed many of Koop's conclusions and says he is not opposed to community-based sex education in schools. "There ought to be a place where kids can get the right scientific information," he says, "provided it is buttressed with the right moral teaching." However, Bennett

Koop: Information is the best protection

cautions, parental involvement is crucial: "Parents must know what is being said and must be informed."

Koop's outspoken views earned him praise from unexpected allies, some of whom have opposed him on other issues, including the national PTA, a longtime supporter of early sex education in the public schools, and the Gay Men's Health Cri-

sis in New York City. "I'm delighted," says Ann Welbourne-Moglia, a child psychologist and executive director of the Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S., a sex-education advocacy group. However, she adds, some of Koop's recommendations may be hard for teachers—and parents—to implement. "To talk about AIDS means you have to talk about sex, death, drugs and alternative lifestyles," she says. "Not everyone can get up and talk about these things as cool as a cucumber."

Few forums: Nonetheless, the issues raised by Koop's report are unlikely to go away. The number of AIDS victims is expected to increase dramatically in the next few years, health officials say, and there is evidence that the disease is extending much faster than previously thought beyond the groups traditionally considered vulnerable, male homosexuals and intravenous drug users. Educators say that even children as young as seven or eight have heard about AIDS on television or have read about it in newspapers. But children often have difficulty getting answers to their questions, with few forums organized to help them out. Although recent polls show most Americans favor some form of sex education in school, only a minority of school districts have comprehensive classes. Researchers say many kids learn the facts of life the old-fashioned way, through whispered confidences with friends.

With the advent of AIDS, the lack of accurate information could be fatal. A significant number of teenagers are sexually active; a third of 16-year-old girls and 43 percent of 17-year-olds have had intercourse, according to one study. Because so

many students are affected, teenage pregnancy has been the most recent focus of sex-education efforts. AIDS poses a much more serious health threat. In his report, Koop says all teenagers should be urged to avoid sex and drugs; teenage boys, he says, should also be told to avoid anal intercourse with other males because it could lead to AIDS. Short of abstinence, condoms are the best known protection against the disease. Koop does concede that getting the message about AIDS across to teenagers is a challenge. "Teenagers often think themselves immortal, and these

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young people may be putting themselves at great risk as they begin to explore their own sexuality and perhaps experiment with drugs."

A number of cities have begun using different approaches to warn teenagers about the dangers they face. This spring San Francisco high schools introduced a series of AIDS classes for all students that discussed the disease and how to take precautions against it. The program is being extended to sixth through eighth graders as well, says Florence Stroud, deputy director of San Francisco's community-health program. School officials believe that "we're going to have the biggest payoff in that group," Stroud says. "That's the age just before kids are sexually active." Students in some cities have watched "Sex, Drugs and AIDS," a graphic film hosted by actress Rae Dawn Chong that shows an addict shooting up and addresses the issues of anal sex and condom use. In Florida, media specialist Karen Oberstein at Miami Carol City Senior High School decided to produce a video called "AIDS—Fear Out of Control!" after students began asking her questions about AIDS; the film will eventual-

O.D.N. PRODUCTIONS NYC Chong: Using condoms can save lives

ly be shown in schools throughout Miami.

AIDS-education efforts at the high-school level are rare enough; students in lower grades hardly ever hear the subject discussed in their classrooms. But Koop recommends that children as young as eight years old should be given information about sex and AIDS "if they haven't already asked the usual questions."

But how can you tell young children about a fatal sexually transmitted disease without scaring them about both sex and death? Children can only absorb relatively simple explanations, experts say. "Our philosophy has always been that you teach kids what they want to know when they want to know it," says Welbourne-Moglia. That means providing answers that are appropriate for a child's age and ability. "I don't think that third graders are going to be able to process things about anal sex and oral sex and needles," says Susan Newcomer, director of education for Planned Parenthood. "I think they can learn that AIDS is a disease that you don't get from your little friends." Dr. Myron Belfer, a child psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School, thinks parents should give youngsters "a factual understanding of where AIDS comes from" by telling them that it is a virus "that one can only get in a particular way." Adds Belfer: "You shouldn't leave the kids with a lot of open questions."

Best defense: A few school systems offer some form of sex education to very young students. In New York City, for example, "growing healthy" courses begin in kindergarten. "The earlier issues are really of self-respect and not being pressured in any way," says Alice Radosh, coordinator of the Mayor's Office of Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting Services. "The specific things about what a family is and how families grow are phased in very gradually."

Most experts agree, however, that education in the home is really the best defense against AIDS. "We wouldn't even be needed if there was communication in the family," says Jerry Kitzi, executive director of Adolescent Resources Corp. of Kansas City, Mo., a health-care service. Too often, Kitzi says, parents abrogate their duty, thinking their children will learn everything they need to know from their teachers or other sources. However, studies of the effectiveness of even the best sex-education programs have indicated that without substantial parental involvement, there is no significant change in behavior.

Many parents feel that they have little influence over problems that seem overwhelming. But educators say the role of parents has become more important—especially in the early years. "The more we can open communication before the teenage years, the more we can keep in touch," says Ellen Wagman, director of training at ETR Associates in Santa Cruz, Calif., an educational-research group that has developed a curriculum to help teachers learn about AIDS. The parents' job, Wagman says, is to instill values so that children will be able to make the right choices as they grow up. "Then," she says, "we just have to hope and pray."

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